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ABSTRACT

Backed by the federal government, the excellence movement in education has advocated higher college admissions requirements and reliance on nationally administered standardized tests. Although intended to benefit the public welfare, these recommendations actually discourage learners considered less worthy. When discussing the movement's mental health implications, one must consider community psychology concepts (equality, supremacy, preeminence, authority, responsibility, rejection, and others) related to individuals' interactions. Essentially, excellence is a function of individual aspiration and accomplishment. When excellence is viewed as a collective property, an inappropriate transformation has occurred that is open to abuse. Institutions, groups, and other collectivities are obligated to serve others adequately, not excellently. Drawing on the work of Polybius, an ancient Greek historian, this paper argues that the excellence movement's attempts to transfer an individual, personal privilege into a social obligation is inappppropriate, misguided, and ultimately pathological. Polybius feared that subsequent generations of authority holders reared in a privileged atmosphere would abandon their high responsibility in favor of avarice and other excesses. Today's educators should not be so quick to condemn the U.S. system of universal education as mediocre, nor to adopt exclusionist higher education policies. Our educational system will be strengthened by maintaining its twofold goal of community advancement and individual progress. Included are four references. (MLH)

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The Excellence Movement in Education and Lessons from History

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The excellence movement in education in the United States is sanctioned by an authority as high as the federal government. In its report, A Nation at Risk (1983), the National Commission on Excellence in Education advocated raising college admissions requirements and the nationwide administration of standardized tests between high school and college and at other transitional points. The report considered these recommendations to be for the public welfare and identified the federal government as the most responsible agency to indicate the national interest in education (National Commission, 1983: 27-28, 33). In addition to advocating standards, these recommendations encourage rejection of learners considered less worthy. I need not remind human service professionals of the impact that rejection has on the human personality.

EA 019 757

In discussing the mental health implications of the excellence movement, one must consider concepts of community psychology that have to do with freedom, equality, supremacy, preeminence, authority, responsibility, duty, obligation, acceptance, rejection, corruption, violence. These concepts have to do with individuals interacting with others. These concepts focus on persons as well as collectivities. They recognize that a proper understanding of individual behavior

requires an understanding of the institutions and groups with which one is or is not affiliated.

Essentially, excellence is a function of individual aspiration and accomplishment and, therefore, is a property of the individual. When excellence is conceived of as a property of the collectivity, an inappropriate transformation has occurred and the possibility of abuse is present.

Collectivities may be held accountable as to whether they are performing in an appropriate way -- that is, whether they encourage individuals to serve others, and whether they enable individuals to sacrifice and suffer for the sake of others.

Institutions, groups, and other collectivities are obligated to help individuals perform these functions adequately, not excellently. Adequate individuals may aspire to excell. This aspiration is their privilege -- a personal privilege and not a social obligation. Thus, I conclude that the excellence movement that attempts to transform a personal privilege into a social obligation is inappropriate, misguided, and ultimately pathological.

I call such a movement pathological because of the damaging social consequences that may result from it. To gain perspective on what happens when individuals begin to aspire for preeminence which is synonymous with excellence, let us consult the record of ancient history. Book VI of the Histories of Rome written by Polybius, the Greek citizen who died in 118 B.C., is instructive (Polybius, 1979).

Polybius, born around 200 B.C. had a wide experience of

Roman and political and military life. He participated in wars and politics. But as a Greek citizen, he was largely free from Roman national prejudice. Thus, he was better able to search for truth according to Betty Radice (Polybius, "Preface," 1979:1).

From 211 B.C. on, Rome was moving toward domination of the whole Hellenistic world (Polybius, "Introduction," 1979:11). Polybius believed that if you wished to pass judgment on the characters of good or evil [people, you should] ... examine their actions ... at times of conspicuous success or failure" (Polybius, 11979:302). We know that Rome as an empire not only succeeded but also failed. Polybius chronicled the happenings in Rome as it rose to a world power. A review of this chronicle reveals events inherent in the success of Rome that also contributed to its failure. Such a review might help the United States, a world power, recognize events within its highly successful society that could lead eventually to its failure. In my judgment, the excellence movement is one such happening. It represents the striving for preeminence.

It is strange the United States that has achieved almost universal education at elementary and secondary levels is so unhappy with this miraculous accomplishment as to pronounce it mediocre and to contend that because of this accomplishment the nation is gravely at risk. Such gross dissatisfaction with such a great accomplishment is a puzzlement. The National Commission on Excellence in Education apppears to be critical of our educational system for becoming too inclusive and suggests in the recommendations mentioned that, at least, higher

education should be saved from this fate by becoming more exclusive. Our institutions of higher education tend to gain prestige by boasting of the number of students rejected. My contention is that the inclusiveness of our educational system has been its greatest benefit. An informed and educated population is better capable of effective participation in the affairs of a democratic society. So the more, the merrier! Not so, state the leaders of the educational establishment who served on the National Commission on Excellence in Education. They view our past educational practices with alarm and warn that we must change our inclusive ways. In the United States, our leaders have not been able "to bear ... with dignity the most complete transformation of [our educational] fortune" (Polybius, 1978: 302), from a closed and exclusive system to an open and inclusive system. The capacity to deal with this complete transformation of fortune is what Polybius called "the test of true virtue" (Polybius, 1979:302). Our society seems to be failing this test in the doubt it has cast on the value of our transforming achievement of universal education by labeling it mediocre.

The call for excellence shifts the concern of formal education away from the two-fold goal of individual enhancement and community advancement to that of personal development only. Such an emphasis fuels the flames of narcissism that threaten our society by eradicating a sense of community and mutuality. I trace the overemphasis on the individual and the underemphasis on the collectivity to the Supreme Court decisions in the mid-1950s that outlawed segregation in education.

Obligated by law to provide equal educational access for all, establishment leaders began to discuss the entitlements of selected individuals. Daniel Bell, for example, said post-industrial society is a meritocracy where high-scoring individuals on standardized tests should be brought to the top to make the best use of their talents (Bell, 197:607-608). This is an elitist orientation that could have serious negative consequences. This attitude is contrary to that of Thomas Jefferson who believed that education shoud equip <u>all</u> with enough wisdom and virtue to manage our common community concerns (Jefferson, 1813:114). The Daniel Bell statement carries a clear implication that high status and great responsibility in society should be reserved for those who have attained excellence.

Polybius, based on his observations of Rome, said that subsequent generations of authority holders reared in privilege will tend to "abandon their high responsibility ... in favor of avarice ... and excesses that go with it ..." (Polybius, 1979:308). It is highly probable that those reared in an atmosphere of privilege and entitlement will manifest high scores of excellence, since achievement and privilege are correlated. Thus, the meritocratic formula for selecting leaders advocated by Bell would in subsequent years perpetuate opportunities for some and exclude others from positions of high status and social responsibility in an arbitrary and capricious way. The experience of arbitrary inclusion or exclusion from public positions of authority because

of a personal attribute of excellence is the matter at issue.

Polybius reminds us, those who have gained access to leadership because of their personal attributes will cease to value equality and freedom and seek to raise themselves above their fellow citizens." Subsequent generations of such leaders, according to Polybius, will begin to "hanker after office ... to seduce and corrupt the people in every possible way." Moreover, "through their senseless craving for prominence," Polybius said, "they stimulate among the masses ... an appetite for bribes and the habit of receiving them" (Polybius, 1979:309). Finally, Polybius reports that those who become accustomed to succeeding at the expense of others will eventually find a leader sufficiently ambitious to do their bidding. Such a leader tends to introduce a regime based on violence that banishes and despoils opponents. In turn, the state degenerates into bestiality (Polybius, 1979:309). This is what happened in the Roman state that formed, grew, ... reached its zenith [and changed] for the worse" (Polybius, 1979:309).

At this time of conspicuous success in the education system of the United States, character in the people is found wanting. Instead of glorifying in the nation's success of achieving universal education, we have begun to grumble about the education that each person receives, especially those who feel that theirs should be a preeminent education.

Movement from concern about community advancement to individual enhancement is in accord with the predictions of Polybius. The revolution for human dignity in the United States is marked by the end of the Civil War. Our national leaders of

education and of other institutions are the children and grandchildren of the founders of the revolution. Polybius discovered in ancient Rome that "as soon as a new generation has succeeded and the democracy falls into the hands of the grandchildren of its founders, they have become by this time so accustomed to equality and freedom ... that they cease to value them and seek to raise themselves above their fellow-citizens" (Polybius, 1979: 309).

Knowing what really causes a nation to be at risk, we should be able to prevent the degeneration of our society in our times. Our educational system will be strengthened by maintaining its two-fold goal of community advancement as well as individual, rather than focusing on only one or the other. This complex goal can be maintained by the practice of inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness in our schools and educational institutions. We know that a polymorphic population is better capable of surviving in a changing environment than one that is homogeneous. Those who survive are by their experience quality members of the species. Thus, high quality and diversity are linked, an understanding the excellence movement does not comprehend.

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